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Washington at Work

A Spy's Bequest: Riddles He Might Love

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 14 — Now is the summer of conspiracy in Washington: new disclosures about the Iran-contra affair, the confirmation agonies of President Bush's nominee for America's spymaster, more questions about whether the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign engineered a politically convenient delay in the release of the Teheran Embassy hostages.

And one man stands at the center of this web of intrigue spinning around the White House: the late William J. Casey. Four years dead, the former Director of Central Intelligence is more of a force in working Washington than most of the living.

In a city where many former officials linger in that category called Forgotten But Not Gone, Mr. Casey has accomplished the opposite trick.

"I think he might very well have enjoyed all this," said Richard Helms, who was Director of Central Intelligence under President Richard M. Nixon and a close friend of Mr. Casey.

But Mr. Helms paused and remembered Mr. Casey's legendary impatience with Congressional investigators and reporters. "I also think," he said, "that by this time he would have been questioned so mercilessly by everyone involved that he would have been sick of the whole thing."

Casey stories abound, stories about his love of intrigue, his grotesque table manners, the famous mumble he used to dodge questions, his alleged penchant for secret trips and secret deals. All that is window dressing to the central question of what Mr. Casey knew about mysteries that are vexing President Bush and fascinating much of Washington this summer.

United Press International, 1983
William J. Casey

How high did the Iran-contra cover-up extend? With renewed vigor, prosecutors are clearly aiming at the Reagan White House, where Donald P. Gregg, who was Vice President Bush's national security adviser, has long been under scrutiny.

They would love to know the answer to their question, and William Casey, who was head of the intelligence agency under Mr. Reagan, might have been able to help.

Who could tell Senate investigators just when Robert M. Gates, Mr. Bush's nominee for Director of Central Intelligence, learned about the plot to finance the Nicaraguan contras with money from the sale of arms to Iran? Was it before or

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Gates's nomination and hand Mr. Bush a major political embarrassment.

Who is the central suspect for those who believe that the Reagan-Bush campaign really did cook a deal with Iran to hold onto the American hostages until after the 1980 election and thus prevent President Jimmy Carter from springing the "October Surprise" that could have salvaged his re-election campaign?

William Casey.

In life, Mr. Casey reveled in his ability to stir every political pot. He died in May 1987 with more secrets intact and more mysteries unresolved than most people generate in a lifetime.

He was the man who knew everything, but said nothing, the powerful figure who ran roughshod over anyone who blocked one of his programs, the old World War II spy who returned in 1981 to make the remote job of Director of Central Intelligence into a policymaking Cabinet position.

He was legendary for his ability to excite Mr. Reagan with heroic visions of clandestine derring-do, and for a time, he excelled at navigating the Machiavellian shoals of the Reagan White House.

Former aides to President Ronald Reagan remember Mr. Reagan's last chief of staff, Kenneth M. Duberstein, going to the Casey funeral with the Reagans and jokingly announcing that he was assigned the responsibility of "making sure Mr. Casey did not change his mind."

In fact, by the time he died at the age of 74, some of the mystique had flaked away. His health had been failing for some time, his crusade against Communism in Latin America had been discredited and his fiefdom at the Central Intelligence Agency was under a siege that ultimately led to its segregation from policymaking.

On Tension and Tenses

But this summer, Mr. Casey's name keeps bubbling into the news, and everyone seems to be talking about him in the present tense.

"Bill is the kind of guy who reads everything he can get his hands on," said a longtime associate and close friend. He paused, chuckled, and said: "I mean, Bill *was* the kind of guy who *read* everything he could get his hands on."

Even President Bush, who probably would rather no one mentioned Mr. Casey's name at all right now, seems to have trouble with his tenses when it comes to Mr. Casey.

Asked recently if he was certain that Mr. Casey had no dealings with the Iranian authorities during the 1980 campaign, Mr. Bush said: "I have no knowledge of what Casey can do."

"Or did do," the President said, correcting himself.

He went on, agitated: "The man's dead. Let's have some more interviews with a dead man. You know what I mean? Get it?"

Mr. Bush was clearly referring to one of the keystone mysteries about Mr. Casey — a passage in the book "Veil: The Secret Wars of the C.I.A." in which the author, Bob Woodward, said he sneaked into the dying man's hospital room and asked if he had known about the diversion of money to the contras.

Mr. Woodward said Mr. Casey nodded yes. He said that he then asked Mr. Casey why and that Mr. Casey replied, "I believed."

This passage from the book published in 1987 by Simon & Schuster has been widely disputed by former Government officials and by friends and associates of Mr. Casey. But it is emblematic of the ambiguity of Mr. Casey's legacy, which feeds both the legend of the man and the manner in which he seems to take such a central role in Washington years after his death.

"It's one of those strange episodes where a man dies suddenly and leaves in his wake two or three questions that assume major importance several years later," Mr. Helms said.

Liked to Take Risks

One reason Mr. Casey is so central in death to the summer's intrigue about the hostages in Iran and the Iran-contra scandal is that he was so central in life to the Reagan Administration's policy on these issues.

He was perhaps the driving force behind the Reagan Administration's efforts to support the Nicaraguan rebels, although his supporters insist he did not break the law against giving them aid.

Stanley Sporkin, who was Mr. Casey's general counsel at the C.I.A. and is now a Federal judge, called Mr. Casey a "risk taker" impatient with those afraid to make decisions. "He made decisions and sometimes he made them more quickly than he should have," said Judge Sporkin, who was appointed to the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit by President Reagan in February 1986.

But he said that during his term at the C.I.A., which ended when he was named to the bench, there was no evidence of Mr. Casey's being in-

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volved in "anything improper."

Judge Sporkin added, "I don't know of any instance when I was there that he would just go out and flout the law."

Incapable of Stupidity?

Suffering from the same lack of hard evidence as Mr. Casey's critics, his admirers — especially in the C.I.A., where he is credited with turning a moribund agency into a vibrant one — often cite what Judge Sporkin described as "his brilliance."

The argument goes like this: Funneling illegal money to the contras or arranging a deal to delay the release of the hostages in Teheran would have been dumb. Bill Casey was not dumb. Therefore, Bill Casey did not do it.

"Casey sometimes trod close to the line in his personal affairs, but he never was caught doing anything illegal," said a former aide to Mr. Casey, who would not speak on the record.

The lingering fascination with Mr. Casey may also result from the way he has become the exemplar of the image that some Washingtonians try to cultivate: the city as a province of politicians, diplomats and spies who hatch complicated plots in whispered conversations behind the potted palm.

The Bush Administration has yet to engender much intrigue or spice of its own.

"It may just be that the Reagan era is more stimulating than the Bush era to write about and investigate," said Michael K. Deaver, Mr. Reagan's communications director. "The only debate now is about whether Tom Foley or George Mitchell is going to Camp David for the weekend."

Washington has a taste for larger-than-life characters to explain what otherwise would be complicated tangles of policymaking woven by colorless bureaucrats in remote windowless offices.

Mr. Casey fit the bill nicely, with his belligerent demeanor and penchant for flying around on secret missions.

For Congressional investigators, Mr. Casey is a tempting target because of his secretiveness, his deep involvement in Reagan Administration policymaking and a combative relationship with Congress that left him with few friends there.

As for Mr. Casey's habit of dissolving into barely decipherable mumbles when he testified, his supporters deny it but some lawmakers and Congressional aides were convinced that this was a deliberate slap at Congress.

"On the Hill, it was recognized that he was very dedicated to his job, very loyal to his President and very much involved in the formulation of policy," said David Holliday, former special assistant to the Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. "It was also recognized that he had maybe half a step above contempt for Congress."

It may even be that this summer's revisiting of the Casey mystique is Congress's way of exorcising his ghost. Certainly, lawmakers have been confronted by the power of his memory.

During the Iran-contra hearings in 1987, Mr. Holliday recalled, "I got a half-dozen calls from good reporters, people I considered respectable journalists. They would start out apologizing and say: 'I know this is going to sound crazy, but I have to ask. Did the committee really go to Casey's grave and dig up his coffin to make sure his body was actually inside?' "